

# *Rethinking the Dichotomy between the Religious and the Secular:*

## *The Emergence of Religion in Modern Japan*

NAITO Mariko

The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science,  
Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, the University of Tokyo

### *1. Introduction*

The classic secularization thesis of modernization has long dominated the study of religion. According to this view, modernizing societies become increasingly secular and rational in worldview, and restrict religion to a private, irrational sphere. Scholars have recently begun to question the secularization thesis, seeking continuities between the pre-modern and the modern, and destabilizing the boundary between the secular and the religious.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I explore the relationship of the secular and the religious in the context of modern Japan. The concept of a religious-secular dichotomy was introduced into Japan during the period of modernization in the late nineteenth century. I will examine the critical response to the religious-secular dichotomy in Japan by focusing on the works of two intellectuals: Natsume Sôseki (夏目漱石, 1867–1916) and Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904).<sup>2</sup>

Both Sôseki and Hearn contrast the religious-secular dichotomy with the concept of *kokoro*, a term often translated as “heart” or “mind.” These authors use the term *kokoro* to conceptualize the interior lives of the Japanese and to critique the divided self imposed by the religious-

1. Talal Asad, Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, and Saba Mahmood, eds., *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, vol. 2 of *Townsend Papers in the Humanities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
2. Japanese names throughout this paper are written according to Japanese convention. Surname precedes given name. Authors with a pen name are referred to by pen name, not surname.

secular antinomy. In his novel *Kokoro*, written in 1914, Sôseki posits the religious-secular antinomy as analogous to that of the individual and the state. I will demonstrate that Sôseki uses the concept of *kokoro* to invert the power relations inherent in these antinomies. Hearn offers a different conceptualization of *kokoro* in his 1896 work, *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life*. Here, Hearn conceptualizes *kokoro* as the foundational belief system of premodern Japan, on which common people still establish their self-identities. Unlike Sôseki, whose critique of secularization inverts the individual-state dichotomy, Hearn seeks to invert dichotomies between the common people and the elite and between East and West.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Sôseki's Kokoro

Natsume Sôseki is the pen name of Natsume Kinnosuke, who is regarded as the preeminent Japanese writer of the modern period. Sôseki became a professor of British literature at Tokyo Imperial University in 1903, after three years of study in England. He also started his literary career in 1903. He established his reputation with the success of his 1905 short story *I Am a Cat*, and he left the university for a full-time writing position at the Asahi Newspaper in 1907. He died in 1916, two years after the publication of his most famous novel, *Kokoro*.

*Kokoro* depicts the modern Japanese individual seeking a meaningful self-identity in a society that separates the secular from the religious dimensions of human life. The character *Sensei* articulates this dilemma in the following passage:

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3. In "Rafukadio Ha-n to kindai no jiga," Hyôdo Hiromi focuses on the problem of the self in the work of Lafcadio Hearn, and briefly contrasts it with Natsume Sôseki's concept of the self. Hyôdo argues that, "Sôseki's concept of egoism (*jiko hon'i*), with its problem of the ego (*ware*) or individual (*kojin*), is inseparable from Meiji nationalism. When comparing this with the complex and multi-layered self (*jiga*) of Hearn's *Kokoro*, one feels the time-lag of Japan's 'modernity' in literary history." See Hyodô Hiromi, "Rafukaido Ha-n to kindai jiga," *Bungaku* 10:4 (July-August, 2009). My paper further explores the comparison of the concept of the self in the works of Sôseki and Hearn through an examination of how the two authors conceptualize the religious-secular dichotomy.

Though I had resolved to live as if I were dead, my heart would at times respond to the activity of the outside world, and seem almost to dance with pent-up energy.<sup>4</sup>

What is the meaning behind *Sensei's* cryptic comment that he lives as if he were dead? *Sensei* sees his life as a conflict between his interior life and the outside world, and has tried to renounce the outside world. He spends his time in reading and introspection, and does not work. In the context of the official values of the Meiji state, such a private person was considered useless or non-existent. For the Meiji state bestowed social prestige upon selfless commitment to worldly success as a way of mobilizing people to contribute to the construction of modern Japanese industry. Scholars have argued that *Sôseki's* characters challenge the official values of public service and private sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> Rather than establish themselves in the outside world for the sake of the nation, they establish themselves in their *kokoro*, a site in which religion and the individual contest the official values of the secular and the state.

How does *Sôseki* depict this? The following passage offers a useful insight into *Sôseki's* concept of *kokoro* as an existential category. Here, the protagonist meets K, a fellow student at Tokyo Imperial University:

I found him holed up in a dirty temple by the Great Kannon. His room was a small one very close to the main temple building; he was very happy that there he had been able to study to his heart's content. It was then, I think, that I saw that his life was becoming more and more like that of a priest. He was wearing a rosary around his wrist, and when I asked him what it was for, he showed me how he counted the beads

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4. Natsume *Sôseki*, *Kokoro*, trans. Edwin McClellan (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 188.

5. For an examination of how the novel *Kokoro* deals with the issue of nation-state building, see James Fujii, "Writing Out Asia: Modernity, Canon, and Natsume *Sôseki's Kokoro*," *Positions* 1:1 (Spring, 1993), and Komori Yôichi, *Kôzô toshite no katari* (Tokyo: Shin'yôsha, 1988). Ubukata Tomoko has argued that characters who refuse to work in *Sôseki's* novels perform criticisms of the notion that labor is critical for self-establishment. See Ubukata Tomoko, *Seishin bunseki izen: muishiki no nihon kindai bugaku* (Tokyo: Kanrin shobô, 2009), 205.

with his thumb, saying one, two, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Sōseki conjures the image of an ascetic monk to depict K. K appears to have withdrawn from secular life and renounced worldly concerns in order to live a life of quiet religious meditation. But K is in fact deeply enmeshed in worldly concerns. He is not a monk, but rather a university student of religion. In the Meiji period, a university degree was the path toward rising in the world and establishing oneself in society. Such ambition carried great prestige, as it represented a contribution to the strengthening of the Meiji state. The monastery and the university are religious and secular institutions, respectively. The monastery suggests withdrawal from the world, while the university suggests worldly ambition.

K's religious interests further suggest the interpenetration of the secular and the religious. Consider the following passage:

I also noticed a Bible in his room. I was a little surprised. Though I could recall that on occasion he had spoken of the sutras, I could not remember his ever having mentioned Christianity. I could not therefore resist asking him why the Bible was there. K said that the Bible was there for no particular reason, except that he thought it only natural that one should read a book so highly valued by others. He added that he intended to read the Koran when he had the opportunity. He seemed particularly interested in the phrase "Mohammed and the sword."<sup>7</sup>

K is depicted with the imagery of Buddhist monasticism, but this does not mean he is a devout Buddhist. On the contrary, K possesses a cosmopolitan view of religion, and seeks value in Christianity and Islam as well as Buddhism. Such a view of religion is, in fact, a product of Japanese modernization. That is, the concept of religion as a universal category for the comparative study of disparate belief systems is a Western concept imported into Japan during the Meiji period, when the Japanese word for religion, *shūkyō*, was first coined.<sup>8</sup> The creation of Japan's first department

6. *Ibid.*, 129–130.

7. *Ibid.*, 130.

8. The Japanese term *shūkyō* (宗教), which denoted a group of schools of Buddhism in the

of religious studies, or *shūkyōgaku*, at Tokyo Imperial University in 1905 established the concept of religion as an academic field.

In sum, the characters of Sōseki's *Kokoro* seek wholeness in a modernizing society of public-private, secular-religious and national-individual binaries. These dichotomies are politically charged, as the state valorizes service in the public secular realm of the state and trivializes private individual religious concerns as selfish. The characters therefore contest the authority of the state when confronting these artificially imposed divisions. The individual's interior space of *kokoro* is not only a site of existential and religious exploration. It is also an indispensable component of modernity and inseparable from secular public life.

### 3. Lafcadio Hearn's *Kokoro*

Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, known as Koizumi Yakumo (小泉八雲), was born in Greece in 1850 and grew up in Europe, mainly in Ireland, and in the United States. He moved to Japan in 1890 and lived there until he died in 1904. He worked as a journalist and a high school teacher and ended up teaching at some universities. He taught British literature at Tokyo Imperial University from 1896 until Sōseki replaced him in 1904. Hearn was also an author. He published a collection of English essays titled *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life* in 1896. Sōseki likely had Hearn's essay in mind when he wrote his own novel with the same title of *Kokoro*.

In *Kokoro*, Hearn defines the basis of Japanese identity in terms of an East-West binary:

Were I to ask any reflecting Occidental, who had passed some years in the real living atmosphere of Buddhism, what fundamental idea especially differentiates Oriental modes of thinking from our own, I am sure

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Edo period (1600–1868), was adopted as the Japanese approximation of the Western category of “religion,” which includes Buddhism, Christianity and Shintō as its subcategories. See Isomae Jun'ichi, *Kindai nihon no shūkyō gensetsu to sono keifu: Shūkyō, kokka, shintō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2003).

he would answer: “the Idea of Preëxistence.”<sup>9</sup>

The notion of interior life as the composite of previous lives is the basis of Japanese self-identity in Hearn’s *Kokoro*:

The Oriental Ego is not individual. Nor is it even a definitely numbered multiple like the Gnostic soul. It is an aggregate or composite of inconceivable complexity, —the concentrated sum of the creative thinking of previous lives beyond all reckoning.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to the autonomous self of the Occidental ego, this Oriental ego is a kind of collective consciousness, inherited from previous generations and shared by all Oriental people, who do not possess individual selves in the Western sense. This collective interiority is the basis of an essential and timeless oriental identity.

To many persons it must seem that the idea of Soul as an infinite multiple would render impossible any idea of religion in the Western sense. [...] The uneducated common people, the poorest country-folk who have never studied Buddhist metaphysics, believe the self composite. What is even more remarkable is that in the primitive faith, Shintô, a kindred doctrine exists; and various forms of the belief seem to characterize the thought of the Chinese and of the Koreans. All these peoples of the Far East seem to consider the soul compound, whether in the Buddhist sense, or in the primitive sense represented by Shintô [...], or in the fantastic sense elaborated by Chinese astrology.<sup>11</sup>

This essential Oriental ego is not an historical entity. It predated the advent of Japanese modernization, and continues to exist in juxtaposition to modern Japan.

Critics of Japan [...] have professed themselves unable to reconcile the

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9. Lafcadio Hearn, *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1972), 222.

10. *Ibid.*, 225–226.

11. *Ibid.*, 232–233.

facts of her scientific progress, and the success of her advanced educational system, with the continuance of her ancestor-worship.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, Hearn locates *kokoro* in an East-West dichotomy. It is the opposite of not only the West, but of the modern as well.

Hearn's viewpoint is clearly Western-centered, and his evaluation of non-Western peoples is easily recognizable as an orientalist caricature. For Hearn, *kokoro* is neither modern nor individual. Although we may criticize Hearn's orientalism, his concept of *kokoro* nevertheless provides useful insight into the relationship of the religious and the secular. Hearn sees in *kokoro* a wholeness that has been lost in the modern West. In this sense, Hearn's *kokoro* as an oriental self-identity is a critique of the Western religious-secular binary that divides the self.

The truth that ancestor-worship, in various unobtrusive forms, still survives in some of the most highly civilized countries of Europe, is not so widely known as to preclude the idea that any non-Aryan race actually practicing so primitive a cult must necessarily remain in the primitive stage of religious thought.<sup>13</sup>

I would emphasize here that Hearn finds the same practice of ancestor-worship in the West as well as in the East. Thus, he finds the same basis for a holistic self-identity both in the West and East. In other words, *kokoro* is a universal human condition from which the modern West has become alienated.

#### *4. Beyond the Dichotomy between the Religious and the Secular*

Sôseki and Hearn present very different geographies of modernity. For Hearn, modernity is a Western phenomenon brought to the East. For Sôseki, modernity is a universal condition in which both Japan and the West exist. But for both authors, *kokoro* challenges the religious-secular dichotomy of the classic secularization thesis. Sôseki's *kokoro* is a modern

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12. *Ibid.*, 266.

13. *Ibid.*, 266.

self that destabilizes the religious-secular dichotomy from within. It is an interior space in which existential and religious exploration overcomes the division imposed on the self by the religious-secular dichotomy. This quest for a holistic modern identity challenges the authority of the state, in that maintaining the dichotomy serves the state's interest. Hearn's *kokoro*, on the other hand, is an ahistorical entity that critiques the religious-secular dichotomy from without. In this case, *kokoro* as Japanese inner life operates within a geographical antinomy of East and West. The East functions as a site where the secular and the religious, the individual and the collective remain undivided. Thus Sôseki and Hearn both seem to confront the fragmentation of the modern self.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the works of Sôseki and Hearn reveal the historicity of the religious-secular binary. By demonstrating the continuing importance of the religious for modern society, Hearn and Sôseki suggest the inadequacy of the secularization thesis as a normative framework for analyzing modernizing societies. Their historicization of the religious-secular binary invites us to take a critical view of secularization, and to investigate its ideological relationship to the historical processes of nation-state formation and capitalist industrialization.<sup>14</sup>

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14. Haneda Masashi has suggested that secularization processes and religious revivals transcend the framework of the nation-state and seek to establish an alternative framework of perceiving the world which is not divided into nation-states or conceptualized in a European/non-European binary model. See Haneda Masashi, "Jinrui, rekishi, kyôsei: 21 seiki ni okeru rekishigaku no kadai," in *Toward a Philosophy of Co-existence*, vol. 13 of *UTCP Booklet*, ed. Nakajima Takahiro and Kobayashi Yasuo (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy, 2009).



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